

BEHIND

THE TEARS

**Understanding,
surviving & growing
from suffering.**

Dr Bruce Robinson

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Preface


It is commonly felt that we don't do well at understanding and handling suffering or responding to those who suffer. We want to, but we often feel inadequate. I felt that so often when I was young. This book is written both to help you deal with your own suffering and to help you help others who are suffering or caring for sufferers. It also aims to develop and strengthen faith because suffering is one of the biggest challenges to belief in God.

Anybody reading this book is likely to have experienced suffering at some level. I say that because my deepest emotion when talking about suffering is that of weeping with those who weep. If you are reading this book and have suffered, I begin by expressing my compassion towards you. Please understand this as you read the book.

I am often asked to talk about suffering, particularly by Christians, because of my extensive experience of it in its deepest and most visceral forms. I have seen it as a doctor working in areas of massive hardship and destruction after natural disasters, and I have seen it in my role of breaking the bad news to patients that they have cancer and then walking the journey with them as they die. It is impossible to tell a young mother with children she has terminal cancer or to care for an innocent young boy who has lost his entire family in a tsunami without confronting the issue of God and suffering.

I get asked the same three questions again and again by those who suffer, regardless of their level of faith:

- Why is this suffering happening?
- How can I handle it when I am feeling sad and crushed?
- How does the Bible's promise of 'growth' from suffering happen when I don't feel like it is?



This book will help you think through these questions. I also hope it will help you grow and better express your compassion towards others in ways that are helpful and not hurtful.

How this book differs from other books on suffering

I was initially reluctant to write this book because there are already many good books on suffering. I have read a lot of them. But several Christians whose opinion I respect felt strongly that my personal 40-year experience of dealing with those who suffer, in the most horrendous of circumstances, gives me a special voice of authenticity. They also said that I talk about suffering in a way that is extremely useful because I discuss strategies that have proven helpful.

That is because my approach is largely practical. This book is not primarily a theological or philosophical study of the issue of suffering—there are other excellent books that focus on that, and they are listed under Resources on my website (see end of book). Rather, I focus on how we can understand, survive and grow from suffering in its different forms. I highlight personal experiences of the worst sorts of suffering so that readers can feel and think about the topic from the heart, not just the head. By concentrating on the existential nature of suffering and our response to it, I hope to move readers to greater levels of compassion and action—that is, closer to the way Jesus responded to suffering.

In short, this book fills an important gap in the repertoire of Christian books about suffering. It is a book for every person who suffers or who

encounters people who suffer, either in the church or in the wider community, to equip them to respond with the compassion of Jesus and be a sweet aroma to those who are hurting.

Throughout the book I share personal stories, both my own and others'. I do this for several reasons:

- These experiences are suffering seen up close, and thus they enable the reader to 'enter into' the suffering of others. That is vital because it is what God did for us—entering into our world and suffering with us—and it helps us to be more heart-oriented towards the issues, more Jesus-like. This is not just an intellectual exercise.
- The presentation of ideas, tips and strategies from people who have understood and responded to their suffering as individuals, families, churches or other communities has been helpful to others. I find that everyone is looking for helpful tips.
- The honest disclosure of personal journeys of pain, sadness and anxiety encourages others to express their own feelings of sadness, anger and disappointment without feeling a need to 'pretend'. This is a big challenge in church communities.
- Sharing stories shows that seeing horrendous suffering is not an automatic knock-down argument against Christianity. Knowing that I have seen so much terrible suffering up close yet remain a committed Christian has proven to be encouraging both for people of faith and for those exploring faith. It becomes impossible to declare that 'everyone who has seen deep suffering stops believing in God'.

Christians use the Bible for direction, like a car GPS in an unfamiliar city. In this book I use Bible verses extensively. I also quote from other individuals who have suffered and/or who work with those who suffer because they are a rich source of wisdom on how to survive and grow from suffering. God expects us to learn from these individuals as well.

One of the main ways we move from abstract knowledge about God to a personal encounter with him as a living reality is through the furnace of affliction.

Tim Keller

Throughout the book you will find ‘huggy-friend’ boxes like this. These are intended to recognise, with compassion, how hard the question of suffering is and to express empathy for the likely suffering you will have experienced. It is very important to me that you understand this. This book is not a simple, quick answer to the agonising questions people have about suffering, nor is it designed to convince people that God exists despite the presence of suffering in the world. I appreciate that even trying to do that can sound dryly intellectual to those who are suffering right now. It can seem lacking in empathy—seeing so much suffering at the coalface has taught me that. I honestly want to send you these hugs.



PART 1


Understanding Suffering

CHAPTER 1

Why understanding suffering is important for everyone

A young man left the church because all he heard from other Christians was that his questioning about suffering revealed a lack of faith. But he felt that blind faith was inadequate to understand big issues like the suffering he had seen.

The purpose of this chapter is to help readers understand that suffering is common and often hidden. We all need to understand suffering—for our own sakes if we suffer, to become more helpful to others who suffer, and to answer the challenges that young Christians and those without faith encounter with the issue of suffering.



Earthquakes, coronavirus, terrorist attacks—hardly a month goes by when we don't have to deal with one or another form of suffering. We experience it as communities, families, individuals. We watch it on the TV news. Then someone we care about gets told they have cancer and will die, bringing us to tears. And all around us are thousands of individuals suffering in silence with depression, chronic pain and deep disillusionment, too afraid to reveal their suffering to others.

Being human has always included experiencing suffering. We all end up with physical and emotional scars, and every scar tells a story. God made it possible for that to happen. This fact has caused many to be angry at God or to refuse to contemplate faith because of the presence of suffering in the world. 'Even if God made the world,' they say, 'he must be capriciously unloving to allow for the imperfections that permit the sadness, pain, suffering, grief, depression and death we all experience.'

Suffering is common

A good place to start thinking about suffering is to understand the sheer amount of it in the world. We can pretend that suffering is not all around us and that we don't need to think about it, but that doesn't help anyone.

Suffering is everywhere. Each year worldwide over 60,000 people die from natural disasters, over nine million die from cancer and over 20,000 die from terrorism. Annually there are more than 400,000 murders and 250,000 rapes. Every day around 20% of individuals (including pastors)

battle mental illness and 45% of adults struggle with chronic conditions. Suffering is inescapable, and we are all at times participants in this world of despair.

The kingdom of suffering is a democracy, and we all stand in it or alongside it with nothing but our naked humanity.

Phillip Yancey⁴

We suffer privately. We suffer together when a member of a school, church, workplace or extended family gets hit with something tragic. We suffer collectively during massive tragedies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricane Katrina, the Bali terrorist bombings, 9/11 and the Japanese and Indian Ocean tsunamis. Suffering touches us all and deeply affects us—physically, emotionally and definitely spiritually.

Suffering is a great equaliser. When I look at any family or other group of people, I assume they have all experienced, or are experiencing, suffering in some form. It may not show, but it will be there. Knowing that makes me more aware of the need to think about it and be ready to respond. We *all* need to think about it or risk responding poorly to our own suffering and that of others.

**WE CAN PRETEND THAT SUFFERING
IS NOT ALL AROUND US, BUT THAT
DOESN'T HELP ANYONE**

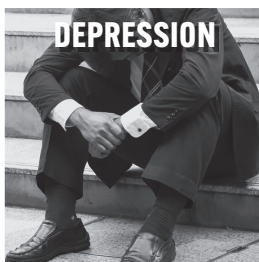
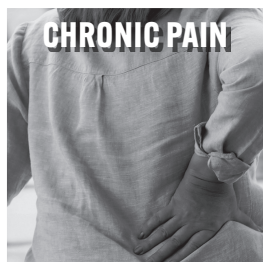
Some suffering is obvious, but much is hidden

Much of the suffering that characterises human existence is all too obvious. Historically it has included world wars, tuberculosis, smallpox, the expected death of half of the children born and the pillaging, mass rape and enslavement inflicted by marauding tribes. Public suffering continues today in different ways. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has killed millions. As I write, my clinical department is at the front line, being a pulmonary department, and colleagues elsewhere have nearly been crushed by this disease. Every country has suffered, not just from the illness itself and the deaths it has caused but from the fear of it, the panic, and the loss of jobs, financial security and social contact. The vaccines are working, but regardless, there will be another COVID-19-like pandemic at some stage in the future.

Natural disasters always hit the front pages of the newspapers. A 'natural' disaster is a non-man-made event such as a flood, earthquake, hurricane, tsunami, tornado or volcanic eruption that causes great damage or loss of life. Natural disasters are sometimes called 'acts of God'. Devastating earthquakes and tsunamis in my region of the world, especially Indonesia, leave poor families weeping over the loss of their homes, their children, their livelihoods.

Most of the time, however, physical natural disasters occur at a distance from us, so the human suffering caused doesn't affect us so deeply. Our family or friends may see such events as arguments against God, but they don't touch us or our communities like other more personal forms of suffering. Many of these personal forms of suffering are hidden. Some of them are more common today than in the past. Each one has different impacts on the sufferers and those around them. I have noticed as a doctor that if you 'scratch the surface' of anyone older than around 35, you will find grief, often caused by one or more of these hidden types of suffering.

Examples of suffering that are often hidden



We won't be able to help others if we don't understand these hidden types of suffering, and we won't be able to handle our own suffering unless we acknowledge and deal with them. This is especially important because those whose suffering is hidden often feel shame or believe that they are frauds.

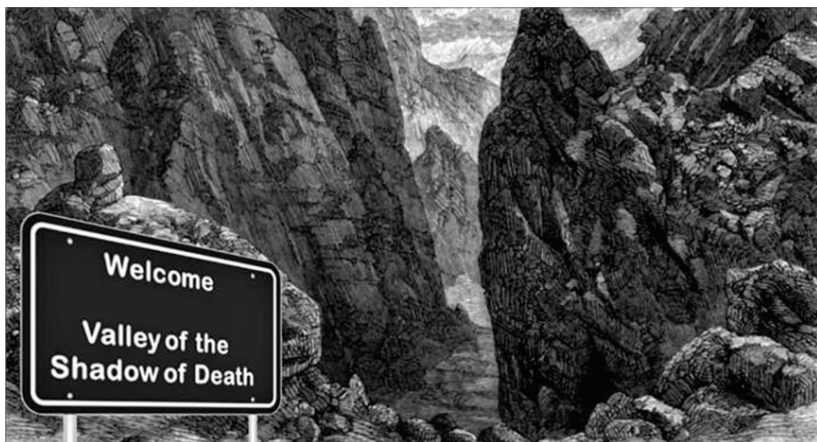
Why it is necessary to understand suffering

Understanding suffering is equally important for those who suffer, those who care for sufferers and those for whom suffering is a challenge to faith.

Understanding more about suffering is helpful for those who suffer.

The first question I am usually asked by a sufferer is *why?* Why me? Why my child? Why does God allow it? Why does my family also have to suffer? Why now, when I have so much to do?

The Bible makes it clear that suffering is unavoidable. Anyone who has read Psalm 23 knows about the valley of the shadow of death, that dark, fearful place that God tells us we will all enter at some time, to some extent. You may feel you are in the valley of the shadow of death now, and if so, I hope and pray you will find this book helpful.



The Valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23) represents an unavoidable experience for everyone at some time

The Bible does have some clear answers to the issue of suffering and ways to respond to it. But it also declares that we can only see these things through a mist—through ‘a glass darkly’. What the Bible does provide is a roadmap for the future. It also makes clear how we can get through the valley.

Understanding more about suffering is helpful for those who care for sufferers. We see someone suffering and feel an urge to respond. But it can be hard to know what to do. Typically, when we care for someone who is suffering, we feel frustration and sadness too, but we don’t know how to express those feelings. We feel compassion, but we find ourselves saying or doing things that make matters worse. Or we are so afraid we will say

something unhelpful that we say nothing at all and end up avoiding the suffering person.

We may hesitate because we are fearful of making matters worse. Sometimes we do nothing—not because we don't care, but because we feel out of our depth.

Sally Sims²

I have cared for many hundreds of cancer patients; I have seen poverty, disease and sadness in countries like Nepal, Papua New Guinea, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan; and I have worked as a medical volunteer in some of the worst natural disasters in modern memory. I have wept with people in each of those settings. It has been impossible for all of that not to touch my heart and drive me to learn more about people's suffering. I now feel it is an honour to be present in such moments.

Most of us don't feel comfortable talking with people who are suffering about what they are going through. It takes an effort to learn what to say and how to say it, plus what *not* to say. This book will help anyone willing to make that effort.

Understanding suffering is helpful for developing and defending faith. Suffering is one of the greatest challenges facing Christian belief, and a confronting issue for those interested in faith. So it is crucial to be able to understand and discuss it. Avoiding such discussions can lead to disillusionment with the church and to disbelief. Rather than using clichés to sidestep the issue, we need to face it squarely and honestly. Without that, we risk alienating those Christians, or children of Christians, who watch the TV news or experience suffering themselves and want answers.

Why failing to discuss suffering is so damaging

Failing to discuss suffering and similar difficult issues can challenge the faith of Christians. Here is the personal story of one such young Christian who became spiritually disabled, confused and disillusioned by the failure of the church to address questions such as ‘Why is there human suffering?’—and what happened when he found people who did address them with an open mind.

THE STORY OF ‘TWINK’S MAP’



Bryan and Twink Parry and their children in Thailand

In the mid-1970s, Dr Bryan Parry, his wife Twink and their three children were working in a mission hospital in Manoram, central Thailand. They had the sort of commitment that would take a whole family away from their comfort zone to work with the poor to ease their suffering. Bryan was a surgeon. The work was busy.

A disillusioned visitor

While they were there, they were visited by a long-haired, bearded backpacker in faded jeans. He was traveling through Asia on a journey of ‘self-discovery’. He told them that although he had been a Christian for six years, he had become disillusioned by what he saw as the church’s failure to engage with key questions posed by himself and his friends—questions such as ‘How can a loving God allow suffering?’ When people suffered, he said, they were told, ‘It will all be OK in heaven, so just pray for patience’; ‘Everyone can be healed if they have enough faith’; ‘Suffering is all due to Original Sin and the fallen world.’ They even heard that ‘all sufferers deserve whatever they are going through’—a notion indistinguishable from primitive superstition. He said he felt that blind faith alone was never enough to understand this life.

Freedom to search for answers

Being told that it was ‘better to show more faith and pray more’ was enough to create disillusionment. So he had decided to put his career on hold, leave home and start thinking and living free of dogmatic and interpersonal constraints. He began to travel the world, searching for an authentic truth chosen by questioning and open-minded consideration rather than tribal dogma. By the time he left for his trip he had dropped his faith and was reading ‘God is dead’ literature. He happened to visit the hospital in Thailand where the Parrys were working.

During an evening meal with Bryan and Twink, their empathy must have made him feel listened to, because that conversation unearthed his concerns and his smouldering anger and frustration, emotions he often kept hidden in Christian circles for fear of losing acceptance. They listened to what he had to say and then in response suggested that the

best place for him to go was a Christian community they had stayed at in Switzerland known as L'Abri. After the meal, Twink drew a small 'mud map' on a scrap of paper to help him locate it in the Swiss Alps, because it was hard to find.

The young man continued his backpacking trip and ended up in England. For some time he kept on with his personal search. But two years later, after several months backpacking around Europe, he finally remembered Twink's mud map, buried at the bottom of one of the pockets of his backpack. Using that two-year-old map, he eventually reached L'Abri.

Honest answers to honest questions

His time at L'Abri changed his life. He entered the commune as a disillusioned, questioning young man, the very sort of person the community was established for. He spent his days working, studying, discussing and arguing. He listened to thoughtful Christians dealing with complex issues like human suffering, especially the founder, Dr Francis Schaeffer. Questions were encouraged, and he thrived. He left with the feeling that although Christianity was not crystal clear on some issues, it stood on a rational, reasonable foundation, whether considered from a philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical or biological perspective.

Because of this experience, the young man's Christian faith was restored—more thoughtful, more authentic, more personal and more solid. All of this underpinned and changed the way he lived his professional and personal life from then on. He had moved from myth and dogma to a position of personal life-changing conviction, and a sense that issues like suffering could be examined thoughtfully and rationally. And all of this was in large part due to Bryan and Twink's encouragement, and Twink's mud map.



Twink Parry with the two children who were killed in Thailand

Two years after sketching that map on a scrap of paper on their kitchen table, Twink Parry and her children headed out from the hospital with other team members for a Saturday picnic. Bryan stayed behind because he was on call for emergencies. A truck smashed into their bus, instantly killing Twink, her daughters Becky, 5, and Adele, 2, and nine others. Bryan was devastated. It is hard to imagine the level of suffering he felt.

Their sacrifice and suffering have since inspired many. Certainly the life of at least one young backpacker was forever changed partly as a consequence of their willingness to discuss difficult issues and offer encouraging advice. When I heard about that bus accident and the deaths of Twink and the girls, I felt terribly sad. And I am weeping now as I write this story, because, if you haven't guessed already, that young backpacker was me.

Understanding how people respond to evil and suffering

Everyone reacts to suffering in different ways. Knowing this is helpful because it will inform how we answer the 'why' question. In the end, our responses to suffering are an individual choice, with some of those responses being easier or harder to embrace depending on our individual history and personality.

I was reminded of this diversity of response while working as a young man on a relief team following Cyclone Tracy, which ripped through the northern Australian town of Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974. Most of the town was destroyed, so children woke to devastation, not Christmas gifts. One father I spoke to had gathered his family during the cyclone in the only brick section of their home, the bathroom and laundry downstairs, and the storm destroyed the entire house except for where they were sheltering. He prayed throughout the night and gave thanks to God in the morning when they survived. Another man had been staying at the YMCA; watching the window of his room bending in and out he knew that at any moment it would explode and shower him with glass, so he pulled the wardrobe out from the wall and sheltered behind it. Sure enough, the window did explode, and jagged glass and raging winds burst into the room. He told me he shook his fist at God and shouted and swore at him over the noise of the storm.

The same event but two completely different reactions. Ultimately, we choose to think about suffering in ways that are driven by our emotions more than our logic. The great scientist Charles Darwin was a Christian until his beloved ten-year-old daughter, Annie, died. This sequence is common. How we view suffering is also driven by our community, that is, by people whose thinking and actions we like and admire.

I would argue that a considered, thoughtful view of suffering is more likely to be a strong foundation for the future, for dealing with our own and others' suffering, than a visceral, purely emotional view. Yet there will always be a 'heart reason' behind people's interpretation of their suffering, and it is helpful to find out what that is—to understand suffering from 'behind the tears'.

**WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU CAN MAKE
YOU STRONGER, BUT IT CAN ALSO MAKE
YOU WEAKER... IT'S YOUR CHOICE**

Understanding suffering can transform the future

One thing is clear from the Bible—suffering is not meant to leave us in a valley of despair but to transform us, to make us better people. This is not only a clear biblical mandate but has also been observed by many who have suffered or witnessed suffering.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 5:10

Scars are tattoos with better stories.

Anonymous

Suffering can transform your future, but this might be for good or bad. If suffering is not dealt with, it can lead to blame and bitterness. It is not

true that ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’—it *can* make you stronger, but it can also weaken you and leave you stuck in the prison of grief and despair. Responding well to suffering includes seeing it as a foundation for looking forward and answering the ‘what’s ahead of me?’ question: ‘How am I being transformed?’ Not doing this has left many individuals stuck in the valley, either depressed and frustrated or locked in anger and bitterness.

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3

How this book may help

It might seem morose to talk about all of this suffering, but I think it can drive the opposite outcome. It can help create emotionally rich, compassionate communities of people who are growing in wisdom and communication skills, people who respond to their own and others’ suffering with confidence instead of fear. Churches can be these kinds of communities. That is why I believe that all church members should learn the kinds of skills described in this book, and why every pastor, carer and friend should have a well-used copy of a book like this on their desk. Teaching parishioners and other groups to respond better to suffering is important for

- their parish—to teach their church about being prepared to handle suffering and respond appropriately to it
- their pastor—because a pastor’s job is hard, and suffering is common in their profession

- their wider community—to enable Christians to better express the love of Jesus in their neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools.

I appreciate that in reading this book you might remember and even relive some of the suffering, pain, frustration, sadness and hurt that you or someone you care about has experienced and may still be experiencing. I am sorry if this happens. I acknowledge too the anger you may have felt towards God and towards the world and others, and that this may have led you to massive doubts about God's existence or his love, and may even have caused you to lose your faith. I hope you will find something in this book that helps you on your journey. And if you know anyone who is struggling with suffering, as either a victim or a carer, you might consider making a time to discuss parts of this book with them over coffee.



Key points

- Everybody will suffer at some time—it's part of being human and alive.
- People suffer in a wide variety of ways today, many of them hidden.
- During times of suffering the anguish can feel crushing and inescapable.
- Friends and family often don't know what to say to sufferers, and their words and actions can make things worse. We all need to get better at it.
- A deeper understanding of suffering is valuable to both those who suffer and their carers.
- Suffering can transform our futures, for good or bad.